DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 187 733 TM 800 228

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TITLE Reasons Why Evaluations and Testing Don't Inform.
INSTITUTION NTS Research Corp., Durham, N.C.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (64th, Boston, MA, April 7-11, 1980)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adoption (Ideas); *Educational Assessment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Information Utilization; Models; Organizational Climate; Participant Characteristics; Program Evaluation; Research Problems; School Districts; Testing; *Testing Problems

ABSTRACT

A number of organizational, personal and methodological characteristics have been identified through the literature which inhibit or can be used to facilitate the use of evaluation and testing information. Inhibitors of information usage include organizational characteristics such as loosely coupled and decentralized systems, personal characteristics such as lack of awareness or interest in the needs and values of evaluation, and methodological characteristics of the evaluation. Although a few of these characteristics are static and not easily changed, most can be modified through the strategies of (1) creating a demand for the utilization of evaluation and testing information, (2) facilitating cooperation between evaluation personnel and decision-makers, and (3) improving reporting practices. A model of local district use of evaluation and testing information based on these characteristics and strategies were presented and discussed. (Author/CTM)

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# AERA 1980

American Educational Research Association
Annual Meeting
Boston, Massachusetts
April 6-11, 1980

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# Reasons Why Evaluations and Testing Don't Inform

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Paper presented as part of a symposium
on SEA and LEA Strategies to Increase Utilization
of Evaluation and Testing Information.
1980 AERA Annual Meeting,
Boston, Massachusetts, April 1980.

# Reasons Why Evaluations and Testing Don't Inform[1]

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Over 200 million standardized test administrations occurred annually prior to large-scale federal initiatives for evaluation and reporting such as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Goslin, 1965). Since that time, and in spite of numerous attacks against testing as being unfair, biased and intellectually damaging (see especially Hoffman, 1962; Wargo and Green, 1978; NEA, 1979), the number of tests administered has multiplied rapidly. Primarily as a result of Title I and other federally mandated evaluations, the assessment of student achievement has become the principal function of local school district evaluators, and testing is the major method of data collection (Lyon et al., 1978). The major use of the results of such testing, however, is the "straight reporting of scores, a process not closely tied to program improvement" (p. 77). Therefore, testing results in most districts have been used to a limited degree and have not been utilized as an effective tool in the decision-making process for local school improvement. Usually, testing and evaluation have been used more often to examine educational accountability, determine the nature and extent of individual differences, and to measure achievement of goals, but not to provide information for sound educational decision-making.

Numerous studies have investigated the uses of evaluation at various levels of decision-making and the ways in which evaluation results have been

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[1] Paper presented as part of a symposium on SEA and LEA Strategies to Increase Utilization of Evaluation and Testing Information. 1980 AERA Annual Meeting, Boston, Massachusetts, April 1980.

[2] The author is grateful to colleagues of the NTS Research Corporation whose ideas helped to generate this paper, especially to Dr. Ernest W. Strang who assisted in the original literature review.

misused (Cicchinelli, 1977; Cook and Pollard, 1976; Edwards and Guttentag, 1977; Goslin, 1967; Sroufe, 1977; Yeh, 1979). The consensus of these examinations is that evaluation is useful only to the extent that it serves decision-makers.

The most extensively evaluated program has been the Title I program of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which has included varying federal requirements for local evaluation since its enactment in 1965. Although many prominent evaluators have indicated the desirability of using evaluation results on the local level (Cronbach, 1963; Stake, 1967), recent studies have indicated that little local use of Title I evaluation results for program improvement or decision-making is occurring (Wholey and White, 1974; Timpane, 1976). In fact, evaluation results generally have served neither as a means of judging program results nor as a guide to program improvement (David, 1978; Goettel, 1978). The CSE (Lyon et al., 1978) survey of local evaluation practices found an over-emphasis at the local level on measurement and score reporting, frequently to outside agencies, at the expense of data analysis, especially analyses designed to provide information which can be used for local program improvement.

The purposes of this paper are (1) to discuss some of the reasons why the use of testing and evaluation information is being inhibited in local schools, (2) to develop a model of school district influences on the use of testing and evaluation information, and (3) to present several strategies for overcoming this lack of utilization.

## Inhibitors of Information Usage

Many studies have investigated the reasons why information is either not used or not used effectively. NTS recently completed a state-of-the-art literature review of information usage (Hensley and Nelson, 1979) and developed

a conceptual framework on ways to provide information to users most effectively (NTS, 1979a). These documents cover a wider area than the literature on utilization of evaluation and testing information because they consider the general topic of information usage. However, test and evaluation information can be considered as part of the topic of general information usage.

Generally, from five to seven factors have been identified as affecting the effective utilization of information (Havelock and Lingwood, 1973; Guba, 1975; Young, 1978). Across these factors there appear to be three general factors affecting utilization: organizational characteristics, personal characteristics and information characteristics. Each of these factors is considered in more detail in the following sections.

## Organizational Characteristics

There are several types of organizational characteristics which can influence the effective utilization of information. These characteristics concern the structure, climate and politics of organizations.

Organizational Structure. The structural characteristics of organizations can have a great impact on information usage. "Linkages between educational sub-systems are relatively weak compared with other types of organization" (Louis et al., 1978) and change is more difficult to effect in such "loosely coupled" systems (Weick, 1976). Local evaluation offices are one example of part of a "loosely coupled" system, the local school district. In addition, evaluation offices are often considered to be different as evaluation staff usually come from outside the district and typically do not follow the same career ladder as other local educators who are promoted within the district. This finding is supported by studies of Caplan and Barton (1976) who found that evaluators are members of different communities than most

other education personnel and also by the Huron Institute (1979) which posited a strict division of labor exists in most instances between the roles of evaluators and users.

Decentralization of organization activities can lead to increased capacity for knowledge flow and utilization among individual members, but may hamper interactions between units (Havelock, 1969). Other organizational characteristics which can affect information utilization include organizational complexity (Brittain, 1970), size (Mansfield, 1963; Markham, 1965), mutliple decision points in the organizational structure (Rourke, 1969), and, for public organizations, "monopoly power" (Downs, 1967).

Organizational Climate. There is a vast literature on organizational climate and its effects on attempts at change (see Strang, 1977). For example, mechanistic organizations--those characterized by impermeable internal boundaries around tasks and groups with precise role definitions and primarily hierarchical interactions--are less successful in implementing change (Burns and Stalker, 1961).

The effects of tenure and change in leadership of information use are well known (Griffiths, 1964; Havelock, 1969). For example, more change occurs when a leader comes from outside the organization than when promoted from within (Griffiths, 1964). Managerial style also has implications for the utilization of program evaluation (Cox, 1977). Individuals at different levels of responsibility can have quite different information needs (Kennedy, 1978). Younger administrators probably use evaluation information more in decision-making than older administrators because of differences in emphasis during their educational training programs (Abt Associates, 1979).

Organizational Politics. Although this review of the effects of organizational characteristics on information use is meant to be illustrative and

and not comprehensive, no discussion would be complete without some reference to the importance of the political nature of evaluation. The political contexts of organizations which may affect utilization are discussed by many authors, notably Weiss (1973), Abt (1976), Freeman (1977), Chelimsky (1977), Cronbach (1978), Wildavsky (1979), and Levitan and Wurzburg (1979). In addition, many important educational decisions are constrained by politics and/or budget limitations (David, 1978).

Personal Characteristics

Personal characteristics affect the utilization of information by individuals. These characteristics can be divided into information needs, interest and ability.

Information Needs. The information needs of an individual affect the type and amount of information used. Individual information needs are defined by Mason (1978) as the difference between a person's overall needs and the capacity of that individual to fill some or all of those needs. In other words:

*information needs = overall needs - capacity*

Often, an individual is unaware of his/her information needs. Systematic needs assessment on the organizational level and self-sensing at the individual level are two ways of assessing needs (Havelock and Lingwood, 1973). Additional needs can be sensed by examining the discrepancy between plans and actual operations (Guba, 1975).

Interest. The degree to which potential users are interested in the evaluation findings is another important consideration in effective information usage (Havelock and Lingwood, 1973; Young, 1978). In addition, individuals who are open to new ideas (Havelock and Lingwood, 1973) and to differing values (Luschinsky, 1963) utilize information more extensively. The

tendency of decision-makers to distrust evaluation, to insist on autonomy from evaluation findings, and to make decisions based on personal experience or familiar materials and theories rather than evaluation information is discussed by Lange and Speiss (1974). Hoover (1972) stated that educators tend to rely on face-to-face communications with colleagues, anecdotal information, and advice of others more than on general educational information.

Ability. To utilize information effectively, an individual must have more than information needs and commitment. Individual skills and abilities, especially in needs expression and articulation, problem solving, and adaptation and integration skills, also are important (Havelock and Lingwood, 1973).

Informally collected information may play an equal or larger role than evaluation data in decision-making (Caplan, 1976; Cohen and Garet, 1975; Rossi, 1967; Weiss, 1970). More sophisticated users, however, will frequently "look to information to confirm . . . and to refine, rather than revamp strategies" (Crandall and Harris, 1978).

Decision-makers must take the initiative to actually make decisions whether or not they use available information (Alkin et al., 1979). Hood and Blackwell (1976) report that "patterns of information use may be as much personal style as they are requisites of the user's job or position" (p. V-2). Additional factors affecting information use by individuals include levels of use, user skills to seek out and use information, and user motivation (Hensley and Nelson, 1979).

Methodological Characteristics

Methodological characteristics of evaluations and reporting can affect the utilization of their findings. These characteristics include the role of evaluation and reporting characteristics.

Role of Evaluation. The purposes of testing and evaluation activities should be defined clearly. Unless evaluations are purposeful and provide information which can fill existing needs, the results will not be used effectively. Van Geel and Tyll (1970) found there is a "fundamental incompatibility between the demands of evaluation and the vested interests of many public school systems as they operate today." The relevance of information to a decision which must be made is the primary test of its validity (Patton, 1978; Madaus et al., 1979). Also, the credibility of the evaluator plays a major role in determining the degree of utilization of the evaluation results (Lange and Speiss, 1974; Guba, 1975).

According to Hoover (1972), the literature of education is of such high volume and so seriously lacking both in scientifically verified propositions and reliable program evaluations that syntheses of practical experience and research findings are rare reducing applicability to users. In fact, Mushkin (1973) contends that evaluation is being used as a decision-making tool more than it warrants, especially in light of the present state of scientific understanding and of the expectations placed upon evaluations by the public. She contends the methodology of evaluation is still inadequate to serve as an overall policy guide.

A major methodological constraint associated with local school evaluations which reflects their utility is that they tend to be summative rather than formative (Weiss and Rein, 1972; Lyon et al., 1978; Yeh, 1978). Neilson (1975), in a study comparing program managers' perceived needs with results of formal evaluations, discovered that impact data are not the type of information required to improve programs. There seems to be a major conflict between the information needs of government-mandated evaluations which require

summative information (e.g., Title I) and locally-useful information which needs to be more formative.

A considerable number of policy-related evaluations are being implemented by the federal government. However, single studies rarely affect policy, but rather tend to have a cumulative effect (Cohen and Garet, 1975). A study in California found that the utility of evaluations for making policy decisions was severely limited by inadequate reporting, methodological weakness and a lack of integration of findings from different studies (California State Legislature, 1975). The nature of evaluation findings often contributes to their non-use since . . .

> . . . the findings of an evaluation are often muddy; determining what constitutes a rational response is highly programmatic; and deciding whether the response was made in reaction to the evaluation or to other forces is equally difficult. (Alkin et al., 1979, pp. 29-30)

Characteristics of Reporting. Quality of the information reported has been identified by many writers as a major contributor to the use or non-use of evaluation findings (e.g., Brittain, 1970; Guba, 1975; Armor et al., 1976; Osterlind, 1979). In addition, other methodological problems include the appropriateness of the questions posed (Young, 1978), the timeliness of reporting (Standards, 1978; Wholey et al., 1979), clarity of the report (Alkin et al., 1979), and the feasibility of using the information (Caplan, 1976).

Another key factor affecting the utility of evaluation reports is their readability. Although complex and technical empirical reports may serve to promote the professional identities of evaluators (Berger and Luchmann, 1976) and occasionally serve to legitimize decisions because of their apparent credibility (Edelman, 1964), such reports more frequently tend to induce dismay and non-use (Chelimsky, 1977; Strang et al., 1977).

The use of dissemination activities and reporting for creating awareness and usage of information is very important. Information which is known cannot be utilized. All too often test results are filed, and evaluation reports are issued and then forgotten. The direct relationship of the recency of an evaluation report and the possibility of its being used effectively has been noted (Huron Institute, 1979).

Thus, the literature is filled with reasons why information may not be effectively utilized. Nevertheless, methods which can be used to increase the utilization of information are available. To provide for effective utilization a model is needed to guide local utilization of evaluation and testing information.

## A Model of School District Influences on the Use of Evaluation and Testing Information

In the previous section the inhibitors of local use of evaluation and testing information were identified through a brief review of the literature. In this section, a model of local school district use[3] is presented.

A model of local school district influences on the use of evaluation and testing information is presented in Figure 1. The model emphasizes an interaction between static district organizational characteristics (which are relatively immutable) and evaluation and testing information demands and pressures (which can be more easily manipulated). These demands and pressures are based on an extension of the literature review in the previous section and so are divided into organizational, personal and methodological characteristics.

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[3] This model represents a substantial revision of a model previously developed by Drs. Robert Goettel and Eugene Royster of the NTS Research Corporation. The author is indebted to their previous contribution.

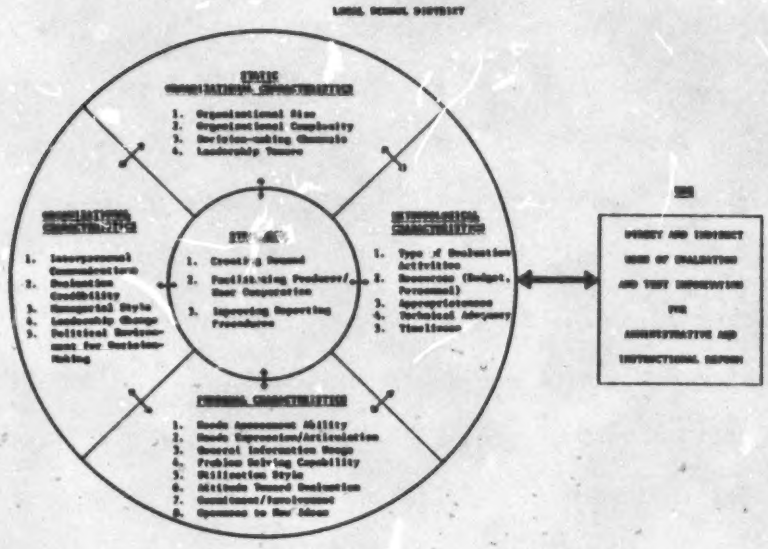

Figure 1: A Model of School District Influences on the Use of Evalution and Testing Information

Organizational Characteristics. The static district organizational characteristics include variables which usually are extremely difficult to modify. These characteristics include the size and complexity of the organization, the accepted channels to follow in decision-making and the tenure of the leadership within the organization.

Fortunately, there are some organizational characteristics which can be modified more easily. These include structural characteristics such as interpersonal communications and evaluation credibility. Interpersonal communications can be enhanced through changes in organizational structure, such as reorganizing divisional setups or rearranging reporting responsibilities of units within larger divisions. Evaluation credibility can be enhanced through reassignment of the evaluation function, e.g., as an arm of the administration, or through administrative directives. These organization structural changes can result in changes in organizational climate as well, including

establishment of different expectations for styles of management. In addition, although changes in leadership are not easily leveraged, when such changes occur they can be capitalized on to establish a different organizational climate. Finally, these changes in organizational structure and climate will affect and be affected by changes in the organization's political environment.

Personal Characteristics. There are a number of personal characteristics which can be modified to increase the local uses of evaluation and testing information. Increasing the ability to assess individual needs and express or articulate these needs plus increases in problem solving capabilities can lead to more utilization by both individuals and groups. Also, individual general information uses and utilization styles can be modified. Changes in attitudes can also increase local utilization, including involvement in evaluation activities or increased personal commitments to evaluation plus development of attitudes of openness to new ideas and change and a trust in evaluation findings through an awareness of the evaluation processes and intents.

Methodological Characteristics. Changes in evaluation methodology can influence the degree of utilization of evaluation findings. The type of evaluation activities and their relevance to the needs of various decision-makers plus increases in evaluation resources (e.g., budget, quantity and quality of staffing) can affect the degree of utilization of results by accenting the role of evaluation. Perhaps the easiest area to modify in the local district, especially by the evaluators themselves, is in the area of reporting. The appropriateness of evaluation questions and findings, the technical adequacy of the report and the timeliness of results all have been demonstrated to have a great influence on the potential for utilization.

The interplay of these characteristics can be manipulated through strategies identified in the center of the model to facilitate direct and indirect uses of evaluation and testing information for administrative and instructional reform. Most of these characteristics have already been discussed in the previous section of the paper; the strategies to facilitate use by manipulating these characteristics are described in the next section.

## Strategies to Facilitate the Use of Evaluation and Testing Information

Three strategies have been identified which can facilitate the use of evaluation and testing information: creating demand, facilitating cooperation, and improving reporting procedures. Of course, the static district organizational characteristics cannot usually be modified in the typical setting. The three strategies, therefore, rely on creating changes in other classifications of characteristics as discussed below.

### Creating Demand

Until there is a felt need by one or more decision-makers for information, information will not be used. The local political environment already has been identified as one of the major inhibitors of all types of information usage, especially evaluation and testing information. Of course, the opposite can occur in that the political environment could facilitate a number of local changes which could provide a press for information usage. One way of establishing a climate reflecting the value of evaluation and testing information is to emphasize evaluation and testing activities through the provision of resources for evaluation, testing and decision-making in terms of budget and personnel. Additional management and financial incentives and motivation could be offered to stimulate changes in management styles. The resulting changes in political environment could increase the commitment and involvement

of other staff and change their attitudes toward evaluation activities and the use of evaluation and testing information for decision-making at lower levels.

A second method of creating demand involves employing training techniques. Areas in which training could stimulate a need for evaluation and testing information include individual and group needs assessments, increasing problem solving capabilities and ability to express and articulate needs. Training in these areas could increase personal capabilities to request information and utilize it effectively. In addition, training in methods of general information use could result in changes in styles of information use which generate an openness to new ideas and information, further stimulating a demand for evaluation and testing information.

A number of individual incentives and motivators have been proposed to increase information usage. Hinrichs (1976) offers the following:

- overall organizational norms, role expectations, policies, support, recognition, etc.;
- formal and informal rewards, enhanced job competence, advancement potential;
- supportive supervision, managerial pressure and expectations; and
- peer recognition, acceptance, pressure and the informal social system.

Facilitating Producer/User Cooperation

Weiss (1972) suggests four managerial tactics which can increase information use. Two of these concern increasing the relationships between evaluators and users:

- the early identification of the potential users of an evaluation; and
- the involvement of administrators and program practitioners in the evaluation process.

Cooperation between evaluation personnel and decision-makers is necessary for effective utilization of information; interpersonal communication is essential in establishing this cooperation. Cooley and Lohnes (1969) place much of the emphasis toward usage on administrators, urging them to work with and have input from teachers, the public and even the legislature in order to have an efficient, well-run evaluation system. Leadership and personal interaction are especially important in the facilitation of information utilization (Sieber et al., 1972; Louis et al., 1978).

Evaluators must interact with decision-makers to overcome their skepticism and anxiety towards new information (Sieber et al., 1972), remove the "threat" associated with evaluation (Abt, 1979), increase their receptivity (Smith, 1976), provide for personal involvement and commitment (Patton et al., 1978) and encourage "ownership" (Strang et al., 1977) toward the evaluation. Differences in values are often one source of conflict between evaluators and users of evaluation information. Havelock (1964) discusses six ways to overcome these value conflicts. By not ignoring the values of others, utilization of information can be increased.

In addition to maintaining contact with decision-makers, evaluators should ascertain the decision criteria of decision-makers to better focus the evaluation (Hawkins et al., 1978). This will entail more planning and time, and require a broader definition of evaluation than is generally used (Patton et al., 1978). In fact, Jackson (1977) believes a three year planning and evaluation cycle is necessary in order to increase the probability that school personnel will utilize the results to improve school practices.

Two evaluation systems directly address this problem of more systematic planning and involvement of decision-makers in the evaluation process. The Information Based Evaluation (IBE) procedure proposed by Stenner (1974)

includes procedures for specifiying the relative roles and functions of users of evaluation information. Utilization Focused Evaluation, proposed by Patton (1978), provides processes for conducting evaluations which will yield information which is more valuable to potential users. Both of these systems rely heavily on the direct involvement of potential users in all phases of the evaluation process. By developing a cooperative testing and evaluation system, utilization of the results can be facilitated greatly.

An increase in interpersonal communication will result in an increased commitment and/or involvement of non-evaluation personnel (i.e., decision-makers) in at least part of the evaluation activity. At the same time, the evaluation personnel will have more opportunity to interact with other education personnel to determine their information needs, interests in evaluation and information usage capabilities. In these ways, the credibility of both the evaluation results and the evaluation personnel can be enhanced.

Another method of increasing utilization involves the provision of technical assistance, especially in the provision of personalized services. The importance of personal communication in the effective transmission and utilization of information has been thoroughly noted (see especially Strang, 1977, for a review of the literature). For example, Felix (1979) has found external school visit teams are a very effective method of providing such technical assistance and training. A second important factor in the technical assistance process is the development of well-prepared written and audio-visual materials. Training can facilitate the use of quality materials even when the evaluator has little access to graphics designers and has a limited budget. The technical assistance strategy should be focused and carefully delimited; the strategy should be coordinated between all involved parties, stating explicit responsibilities. Entry procedures and relationship building

are important to establish initial credibility of the technical assistance effort, mutual obligations of both provider and recipient, and continuing assessment of functions and services (Center for New Schools, 1977). The importance of mutual obligations must not be understated as technical assistance should be a cooperative effort (Wholey et al., 1971).

Improving Reporting Procedures

Weiss (1972) presents two other managerial tactics which can be used to increase utilization:

- the prompt completion of the evaluation and the early release of results; and
- the use of effective methods of presentation in disseminating the findings.

Reports should not be written for evaluators; instead, they should be useful to their intended audiences (Datta, 1977). Prior knowledge about each audience should be used to target the reporting of information to maximize usage (Loucks and Myers, 1978). Wherever possible, reporting should be adapted to the managerial styles of potential decision-makers (Cox, 1977). Practitioners and decision-makers should be provided with concrete answers to specific problems or with syntheses of pertinent information to enhance the practicality of the results or expedite their application (Hawley, 1976).

Obviously, evaluators must do needs sensing activities of their own in order to conduct the evaluation activities which can provide the appropriate information to meet the needs of potential users. In addition, the technical adequacy of the report, its clarity and format also are important determinants of the utilization of evaluation and testing information.

## Summary

A number of organizational, personal and methodological characteristics have been identified through the literature which inhibit or can be used to facilitate the use of evaluation and testing information. Although a few of these characteristics are static and not easily changed, most can be modified through the strategies of (1) creating a demand for the utilization of evaluation and testing information, (2) facilitating cooperation between evaluation personnel and decision-makers, and (3) improving reporting practices. A model of local district use of evaluation and testing information based on these characteristics and strategies was presented and discussed.

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  National Institute of Education.
- Evaluation of Urban Area Experience-Based Career Education Program.
  Office of Career Education, US Office of Education.
- Follow-Up Study of Patients Who Had I-131 and Other Diagnostic Procedures During Childhood.
  DHEW/FDA Bureau of Radiological Health.
- National Evaluation of Headstart Educational Services.
  Administration for Children, Youth and Families.
- Operation of the ESEA Title I Technical Assistance Center, HEW Region III.
  Office of Evaluation and Dissemination, US Office of Education.
- Delaware Item Pool Development.
  Delaware State Department of Public Instruction.
- Evaluation of the Comprehensive Project in Adult Functional Literacy Education.
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